NCFR POLICY BRIEF

Strengthening Families:
Bridging Research, Practice & Policy

APRIL 2004

Building Strong Communities for Military Families

THE CHANGING NATURE OF MILITARY SERVICE AND FAMILY LIFE

The nature of military service and military family life has been changing.[1] Thousands of military families are coping with the dangers and sacrifices of deployments in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. Deployment and family separations have become the dominant aspects of 21st Century military service and military family life.[2,3] Military performance and personnel retention are directly influenced by how well families adapt to such demands along with the day-to-day demands of family life.[4,5]

- The U.S. military has maintained large numbers of active duty members and their families in Europe and Asia. Today's trend is to "home base" troops in the U.S. and deploy units overseas to meet world-wide military operational requirements.[6]

- As of 30 September 2003 more than 250,000 military members were serving in foreign countries and another 180,000 were participating in Operation Iraqi Freedom in/around Iraq.[7]

- Since 11 September 2001, 320,000 (or 36%) Reservists have been mobilized for the Global War On Terrorism (GWOT).[8]

- As of 3 March 2003 more than 180,000 National Guard and Reserve members are serving on active duty.[9]

- Early in 2004, about 105,000 troops (40% of whom are Guard and Reserve members) will deploy to Iraq, and many will be there for a full year. This troop commitment will likely continue beyond 2004.[10]

Issue

The families of our uniformed military, which include the National Guard and Reserves, are a vital part of America's Armed Forces. These families serve and sacrifice for our national defense and their well-being is essential for military success. Both the military services and society as a whole share responsibility for creating an environment that helps these families meet the demands and hardships of military life.

Resilient families are able to adapt and continue to function well during mobilizations and deployments, and they are able to successfully meet other challenges of military duty and family life.[11] Community linkages are needed to assist families with information and life skills as they strive to be self-reliant.[12]

PROFILE OF U.S. MILITARY FAMILIES

Active Duty Members* 1.4 million members	*Reserve Members** 880,000 members
• 47% are 25 or younger	• 30% are 25 or younger
• 58% are married and/or have children (i.e., families)	• 59% are married and/or have children (i.e., families)
• 86,700 single parents	• 69,800 single parents
• 47,904 dual military couples	• 21,303 dual military couples
• 1.17 million children (0-18)	• 713,800 children (0-18)
• 41% of children under 5	• 24% of children under 5
73% of these couples/families live off base in the civilian community	**National Guard & Reserves Members (and families) are dispersed in more than 4000 communities spread across the USA.**
*Approximately 85% of Active Duty Members are assigned in the USA	**There are an additional 350,000 individuals In the Individual Ready Reserves – representing a wartime "mobilization pool."*

Data Source: DMDC 2003

SUPPORTING MILITARY FAMILIES

The well-being of military families requires adequate pay and benefits, safe and affordable housing, medical and dental care, quality child care and education, employment support for spouses, and other basic quality-of-life (QOL) requirements.[13,14]

Military families need access to human service programs to help them develop the competence they need to deal with personal and family life challenges - from early parenting issues to caring for their elders.[15] In particular, today's military families need services to help them adapt to specific military life challenges, which include the unique demands of separation and reunion.[12]

The Department of Defense and the military services meet basic needs and provide services that address a broad range of family and military life issues. However, military families need support from civilian community resources as well. Nearly 3 out of 4 active duty military couples and families live in civilian communities, and National Guard and Reserve families commonly live far from military installations. For some military families, local civilian resources are the primary source of support for both short- and long-term needs.

Further, in times of need, families are more likely to turn to friends or members of their military unit (immediate supervisors and peers) than to military community agencies.[16] Thus, strong and responsive connections among individuals, cou-
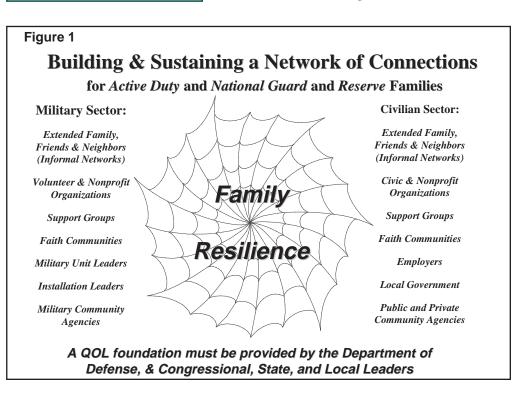
ples, families, and neighbors, and effective collaborations among civic organizations, faith-based communities, local government agencies, and businesses (the total military and civilian community) are critical to establishing a strong network of formal and informal social care and social support within and across communities (see Figure 1). [17,18] **Enhancing the informal network is particularly important because it is a primary source of practical information and social support for military families.** [19]

> A strong network of formal and informal community connections is fundamental for promoting and sustaining military family resilience.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND STRATEGIES

Our policy recommendations and practice strategies identify opportunities for civilian and military communities to work together for the benefit of military families. In the past, the military services have generally assumed the existence of strong connections within military communities and among military families.[20] But strong and supportive communities - whether military or civilian - must be developed and nurtured.[21] To accomplish this, both the military and civilian sectors must provide necessary resources.[22] A strong network of support for military families requires national, regional, and local efforts.

1. *Develop formal relationships* among local public, nonprofit and business groups and organizations and military community leaders focused on the creation of strong and caring communities able to support and sustain military families.

- Local organizations and the business community need to help military base leaders address employment issues, child care needs, and educational policies and practices that make it difficult for military spouses to find job training, educational services, and opportunities for career development.

Figure 1

Building & Sustaining a Network of Connections
for *Active Duty* and *National Guard* and *Reserve* Families

Military Sector:

Extended Family, Friends & Neighbors (Informal Networks)

Volunteer & Nonprofit Organizations

Support Groups

Faith Communities

Military Unit Leaders

Installation Leaders

Military Community Agencies

Family

Resilience

Civilian Sector:

Extended Family, Friends & Neighbors (Informal Networks)

Civic & Nonprofit Organizations

Support Groups

Faith Communities

Employers

Local Government

Public and Private Community Agencies

A QOL foundation must be provided by the Department of Defense, & Congressional, State, and Local Leaders

- Local school officials and military community leaders need to work together to directly address the unique needs of military children. In communities with large military installations, such collaboration is common. More attention should be paid to the needs of children whose parents are in the National Guard and Reserves. Support for ALL children is critical during periods when parents are deployed. Since the majority of military school-age children (85%) attend either public or private schools in the civilian community, the involvement and support of local schools and other community organizations are critical.

2. *Build informal relationships* among military families and between military and non-military families, and provide military families with meaningful opportunities for civic engagement.

- Civilian community organizations and civic groups need to work with military family group leaders to identify and undertake community-based initiatives for families during mobilization and deployment. Local community support is especially important for National Guard and Reserve families. These families may have less experience coping with deployments and their knowledge of and access to the military's formal support system is often limited.

- There is a need to establish a systematic research program to learn how best to promote relationships among military members living in civilian communities, with a specific focus on the nature of formal and informal community connections relied on by families of National Guard and Reserve members in times of mobilization and deployment.

3. *Increase prevention and outreach efforts* to promote and sustain resilient military families, especially families in known high-risk categories or situations.

- High-risk military families include young, newly married enlisted couples; those with infants and small children; those with limited financial resources; and single parents, especially those in units that have a high probability of deployment or who maintain demanding, unpredictable duty schedules. These families need (and often lack) an immediate connection to the informal system of social care - extended family, friends, or caring neighbors. Their social isolation is often a primary indicator of their high-risk status. Some high-risk families need an immediate connection to military and civilian systems of social care where they can obtain timely professional help.

- Local government and non-profit community social service organizations need to collaborate with military leaders and spouses leading unit family support groups to offer emotional and tangible support to high-risk military families before they become overwhelmed. This military civilian collaboration is especially important for National Guard and Reserve families because their primary connection is to the civilian community. Early, preventive interventions with these families can help keep them functional and prevent the kind of distress that causes the premature return of a deployed service member or results in a post deployment family crisis.

- There is a need to shift more family support resources to prevention and outreach efforts, especially for families in known high-risk categories or situations. Effective health and human services programs are a foundation of prevention and outreach. Opportunities exist to enhance current programs.

- There is a need to develop and test innovative, effective and cost-efficient prevention strategies designed to build strong and resilient military community support systems. These strategies must include efforts to ensure that military community human services programs are based on "best practices" and that effective program coordination and collaboration exist among the Services and between military and civilian sectors.

ABOUT NCFR

The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) is the only professional organization focused solely on family research, policy, and practice.

The National Council on Family Relations has also published the Family Focus on Military Families. To access this report go to:

http://www.ncfr.org/about_us/a_p_p_public_policy.asp

Further information is available on the Web sites listed below.

- Defense Link: www.defenselink.mil/ - primary resource for DoD information
- Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy: www.defenselink.mil/prhome/das_mcfp.html
- Reserve Affairs: www.defenselink.mil/ra/
- National Guard Family Programs: www.ngb.army.mil/fp/
- Military Family Resource Center: www.mfrcdodqol.org
- National Military Family Association: www.nmfa.org
- Children, Youth, and Families Education and Research Network: www.cyfernet.org/hottopic/warres.html - resources for parents, teachers and family support professionals in times of war

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